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ISSUE ONE

Monáe

Janelle Monáe's debut album, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* is out of this world – literally. On her eclectic musical masterpiece, the 23-year-old chanteuse adopts the alter ego of Cindi Mayweather, an Alpha Platinum 9000 android who becomes a fugitive after falling in love with a human being, a huge transgression in the robot-plentiful Metropolis landscape. Adding insult to injury, the object of Mayweather's affection turns out to be Anthony Green, son of the robotics industry's first family. Thematically, it's a classic Romeo and Juliet-esque tale of forbidden love; sonically, it's a psychedelic hodgepodge of funk, R&B, soul, cabaret, hip-hop, pop and electronica that's anything but classic.

It's not surprising, then, that Monáe's first industry co-sign came from Outkast's Antwon "Big Boi" Patton, another musician who has often alluded to outer space and cyberspace in his work (from the intergalactic lyrical references in cuts like "E.T. (Extraterrestrial)" and "ATLiens" to the cold, computerized sound of "Synthesizer". Monáe first met Big Boi in 2005, one year after she relocated to Atlanta from New York. Originally hailing from Kansas City, Monáe attended New York City's American Musical and Dramatic Academy and dabbled in some off-Broadway productions before she resolved to release an album of original material. Feeling creatively constricted in the Big Apple, she figured she'd win over more nurturing, open-minded audiences in A-Town, the state that cradled such musical innovators as TLC, Cee-Lo Green, Ludacris, the B-52s and Outkast. And after a few months of gigging within the college circuit, she wound up performing before Big Boi who quickly extended an invitation for her to record some vocals for the song "Letting Go" on his *Got Purp? Vol. II* mixtape. Appearances on the Outkast singles "In Your Dreams" and "Call the Law," from the duo's 2006 *Idlewild* album followed. A guest spot in the "Morris Brown" music video revealed the image of the girl with the big voice. Soon enough, urban music fans were excitedly inquiring about the petite songstress with the quirky fashion style, beaming smile and soulful voice.

One of these inquiring minds turned out to be Sean "Diddy" Combs, who sent Monáe a MySpace message after hearing a stream of her song, "Violet Stars Happy Hunting." After some perfunctory back-and-forth Combs added Monáe to his Bad Boy Records roster and, in April, during an event at New York City's Blender Theater, introduced her to an intimate crowd of music industry tastemakers as "possibly the most important signing of [his] career."

The conceptual seed behind Monáe's debut album, co-executive produced by Big Boi and Combs, was derived from Fritz Lang's 1927 German silent film *Metropolis*. Set in a futuristic cityscape, the film depicts the conflict between two groups: the rulers and the workers (which, in a robotized capitalist world, is also, a tussle between the haves and have-nots). Hardly an escapist film, *Metropolis* explores universal themes like the need for personal freedom and expression.

These are the themes that Monáe, too, tackles in her aponymous debut. In the frenetic, fiery "Many Moons," with its rapid organ riff, full-bodied, "Hey Ya!"-style drums, and throaty vocals, Monáe (singing as Mayweather), sings about being forced to go underground and warns others, "Your freedom's in a bind." But she goes beyond the boundaries of the album's android-in-love storyline in tracks like "Sincerely, Jane," where she tackles society's moral demise, lamenting about women sacrificing their virtue and exploiting their sexuality for overnight fame and monetary gain, young drug dealers destroying the fabric of their communities, kids dropping out of school, and more. When she sings, "Day dreams, please wake up; we can't sleep no more," she does so with a sense of urgency that recalls Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On?" but her angelic vocals add a weepy aura that makes her imploration for awakened social consciousness all the more compelling. The funky "Mr. President," with its groovy horns, wailing electric guitars and slick hi-hats, meanwhile, is a disarmingly honest open letter to the Commander-in-Chief, begging for him to be fiscally responsible and attend to the hungry, homeless and poor.

Monáe's eclectic musical concoctions — which convey the influential effect of predecessors like Jimi Hendrix, Al Green, Lauryn Hill, Outkast, George Clinton, Prince and James Brown— are matched by her daring fashion sense. From her sassy pompadour hairstyle to her signature go-to ensemble —high-waisted black pants, fitted white jacket with black lapel, white tuxedo shirt with black bowtie, black-and-white Oxfords, and large button-shaped earrings — Monáe draws upon a bevy of eras (particularly the '70s and '80s) and fashion icons (from Grace Jones to Katherine Hepburn) when choosing her outfits, always adding her own interpretation and playful flair.

Whether audiences regard her as an "alien from outer space" (as she says on *Metropolis*' opening cut), an "Outkast weirdo stepchild"(like she sings on "Many Moons"), or just a wide-eyed girl from Kansas, Monáe is just happy her music is being heard. After all, without free speech, there can be no personal freedom, and Monáe is a tireless advocate for the oppressed and the persecuted — whether they be robots or humans.

Janelle Monáe / Bowery Ballroom / October 23

Miles

Benjamin

Anthony

Robinson

When crafting his eponymous debut album, Portland, Oregon-born singer/songwriter Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson strove for an array of largely autobiographical, disarmingly sincere songs. Rather than adopt a catchy stage moniker, then, he stuck to his birth name; he wanted the album to be free of gimmickry and artifice. His gruff, blues-y vocals and folksy brand of rock set the perfect stage for his confessional and often gloomy songwriting.

The hopelessness and estrangement seeping through his vocals are a testament to the many tough, character-building experiences he's endured during his 24 years of life. Robinson spent his formative years traveling from city to city with his comedian father, eventually setting off on his own in 2000 and settling down in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, New York's artsy nabe. Though he never stopped writing or performing (he formed a few bands, none of which released any material), a frustrated Robinson did engage in a great deal of self-destructive behavior, including severe drug and alcohol abuse. His addiction even led to a stint of homelessness, during which he slept on benches in Coney Island. Robinson's story, in many ways, is one of redemption. And, while he does address his turbulent past in his lyrics, there's an immediacy and candor to these stories that makes them touching intimations rather than rock clichés.

Featuring contributions from Grizzly Bear's Chris Taylor and Christopher Bear, as well as TV On The Radio's Kyp Taylor, Robinson's debut (released on Say Hey Records) points to influences like Bob Dylan, Fleetwood Mac and Bruce Springsteen. Benjamin reminisces about his darkest moments in the album's first track, the woodsy and morbid "Buriedfied," where he describes attending his own funeral, an image he utilizes to underline his emotional hollowness and the haunting feeling that he "can't do any damn thing right." The song encapsulates the album's vibe: an erratic cycle of bleakness and hope that's sheer genius. Turns out Robinson can do plenty right. Miles Benjamin Anthony Robinson plays the Bowery Ballroom on the 21st of October.

The Whip

Imagine jam-packed ramshackle warehouses doubling as nightclubs, bright rave lights pulsating throughout the space, dancers twirling and swaying to the ear-splitting music. This is the type of scenario where Manchester, U.K. based electro-pop group The Whip flourish. Consisting of vocalist/guitarist Bruce Carter, synthesizer master Danny Saville, bassist Nathan Sudders and drummer Lil Fee (nee Fiona Daniels), the co-ed group's inspiration comes from the members' own love of dancing.

It's this appreciation for the nightlife that has made the group's debut, *X Marks Destination* (Southern Fried Records), an overseas sensation, garnering comparisons to New Order and Joy Division. Singles like "Trash," with its tinny, New Wave-ish keys, reverberating bass, slamming drums and high-pitched guitar licks, took the London club scene by storm. Initially released in 2006 as a 500-edition run, "Trash" quickly became a club anthem. Follow-ups like Blackout," which was written as a tribute to the now-defunct Fab 51 Hacienda (the legendary club in Manchester where acid house and rave throve during the '80s and early '90s and which was immortalized in the film *24 Hour Party People*), furthered their buzz. "Sister Siam," meanwhile, features purposely cheesy synthesizers, a catchy-as-can-be-chorus, and an over-the-top '80s sound that yields a whimsical, tongue-in-cheek effect (the accompanying video, meanwhile, captures the group frolicking inside a cardboard spaceship). See, The Whip doesn't take itself too seriously — its mission is simply to make people dance.

And, while the group came together just two years ago, its members are hardly musical neophytes. Carter and Saville played together in the electro group Nylon Pylon and continued writing and playing together after its disbandment in 2003. They soon recruited Sudders who, in turn, suggested that they bring his ex-girlfriend (Daniels) on board. Together they've cooked up some exciting, comical, fun-loving music that sends listeners on a fanciful journey. As it turns out, The Whip hasn't just reached its destination — it's hit the spot.

Talib Kweli

Talib Kweli / Nokia Theater / October 25

Though he hasn't experienced the platinum success of rap peers like 50 Cent, T.I. and Young Jeezy, Brooklyn-bred wordsmith Talib Kweli, 32, has plenty of laurels to rest on — including an appreciative nod from hip-hop royal Jay-Z who famously rhymed, "If skills sold, truth be told, I'd probably be, lyrically, Talib Kweli." Ever since piquing audiences' interest as one half of rap duo Black Star (alongside Mos Def), Kweli has earned recognition for his intelligent rhymes, which are often rife with Afrocentric historical references and musings on sociopolitical issues.

As a solo artist, Kweli has released four albums, including: 2002's breakthrough *Quality*, which managed to gain some mainstream appeal largely due to the Kanye West-produced single "Get By;" 2004's *The Beautiful Struggle*; 2005's *Right About Now*; and 2007's *Eardrum*, which debuted at the No. 2 spot on Billboard's chart (a milestone for Kweli). He has also established his own label, Blacksmith Records, through which he released female rapper Jean Grae's *Jeanius* earlier this year. Always ready for new musical adventures, Kweli is poised to release three albums this year: *Prisoner of Conscious*, titled in defiance of the constraining "conscious rapper" label repeatedly imposed upon him; a *Reflection Eternal* project (his group with DJ Hi-Tek, with whom he released 2000's *Train of Thought*); and *Party Robot*, the debut album from Idle Warship, his newly-formed alt-soul group with Philadelphia-bred R&B singer Res and Toronto songstress Graph Nobel. The frustration-laden "Industry Diary," Idle Warship's lead single, has been stirring up some cyber buzz since being posted on the group's MySpace page as has the electro-flavored, MC Chris-assisted "Screamin'."

Whether accompanied by long-time contributors like Hi-Tek and Mos Def, performing live as part of Idle Warship, or releasing his own soulful music, Kweli is living proof that what defines a great artist is not the quantity of his sales, but the quality of his work.

Chester French

The year is 2004, and college pals D.A. Wallach and Maxwell Drummey sit at a long rectangular table inside Annenberg Hall, Harvard University's designated dining facility for first-year students. The imposing 9,000-square-foot space, with its stenciled high ceilings and wooden hammer beam trusses, is the epitome of aristocratic grandeur — all classical details without the nouveau riche ostentation. Regal chandeliers dangle from the ceiling, making the wooden floors and deep walnut panel walls sparkle. The top half of the room features exposed brick walls and massive stained glass windows, each depicting an ancient scholar, philosopher or warrior. There's a solemn cathedral-esque quality to the room, the perimeter of which is lined with over 20 busts and 25 paintings. Wallach and Drummey assay their surroundings, taking in every decorative detail. They point to one of the marble busts on the West Wall; a plaque with the name "Daniel Chester French" is situated underneath it. Wallach and Drummey exchange remarks about the name's impressive nature. It's decided: the power-pop group they've decided to found will be dubbed Chester French.

"We didn't know if 'Daniel Chester French' was the name of the sculpture or of the guy who'd done the sculpture," Milwaukee-born vocalist D.A. Wallach says four years later, while on a business trip to Los Angeles. "We just thought the name was cool."

In an interesting turn, Daniel Chester French turned out to be the artist who immortalized Abraham Lincoln through his celebrated sculpture inside Washington D.C.'s Lincoln Memorial and who crafted the John Harvard statue situated at the heart of the Harvard Yard. By choosing this name, the duo further promulgated its Ivy League roots, and yet it was an entirely serendipitous occurrence. "That's where we went to school, but we were never trying to make that the group's image," say Wallach. "It has nothing to do with the music or the album's direction, and it's not a major part of our individual identities. We weren't guys who fit in. We weren't in the Finals clubs. I was majoring in African-American Studies, not Economics!"

Instead of drunken stumbles and repeated "walks of shame," Wallach and Drummey, a Boston-bred multi-instrumentalist, spent many an evening holed up in the campus recording studio, located in the basement of Pforzheimer House. It was there that they developed their unique sound, a delightfully ingenious amalgamation of influences ranging from '60s rock to Motown, classical music, modern-day hip-hop and swing. Though a career in music seemed like a far-fetched possibility, the duo decided to take a chance and record some demo songs to send off to music industry insiders. Says Drummey, "We had three years while we were still in school and there wasn't a lot of risk associated with it so we said, 'Let's go hard and see how far we can take it.'"

A few months before their June 2007 graduation date, Drummey and Wallach began receiving calls from interested label representatives and, before they knew it, they were cavorting with Jermaine Dupri in Atlanta, discussing business with Kanye West and flying out to meet with Pharrell Williams. Ultimately, they opted to sign to Williams' Interscope-distributed Star Trak imprint.

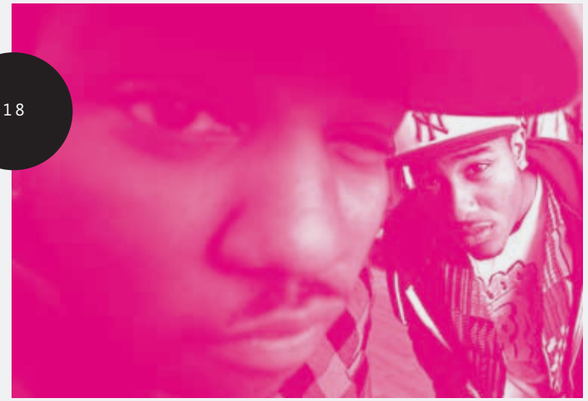
Chester French's upcoming debut album, *Love The Future* (scheduled for a February 2009 release), was entirely written, recorded and produced by the duo. In fact, most of the songs on the album were recorded back in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Audiences are already smitten with the group's lead single, "She Loves Everybody," with its hollow drum snares, Motown-esque clapping sequences, space-aged synths and minor-key melody. The sexy, smoky pop anthem has garnered incredible buzz, landing the pair features in Rolling Stone, Spin, Elle's Fashion Rocks, Italian Vogue and more.

Other notable cuts include "Beneath the Veil," which adds a hip-hop twist to a country sound attained through an acoustic guitar backdrop and Johnny Cash like vocals, and "People," which adds a cheeky modern rock edge to a Brian Wilson-esque, surf music-inspired track.

Informed by Les Paul, David Bowie, the Beatles, and Outkast, Chester French's music defies conventional categorization methods. "Outkast and the Beatles were our touchstones as we were making this record," says Wallach. "I've heard people call us a 'synth-pop' group, but our usage of synthesizers is more inspired by hip-hop than by any '80s synth-pop. We were listening to Outkast's Stankonia, like, 'Let's make it sound like that!'" The duo's avant-garde musical style is matched by its progressive fashion sense. Wallach and Drummey are as likely to be photographed in khakis and button-ups as they are giant feathery costumes. "We did this thing for Fashion Rocks, and I wore a bird suit, "Wallach says. "That was pretty strange…and we've got a lot more on the way." Citing Robert Redford, Steve McQueen and Andre 3000 as style influences, Wallach stresses the importance of uniting "good taste and experimentation."

And, as with their sound, these two are more than happy to spend some time experimenting with fashion. "Music and fashion have always been closely intertwined; a lot of people have a appreciation and understanding for music when they have a visual to go along with it," Wallach reasons. "Our goal has been to match the diversity and adventure of the music in the clothes we wear." Mission accomplished.

Cool Kids



Before they became the Cool Kids, Detroit native Evan "Chuck Inglish" Ingersoll, 23, and Chicagoan Antoine "Mikey Rocks" Reed, 20, were Internet geeks. The hipster rappers first connected on MySpace.com back in 2005, when Mikey inquired about buying a beat Chuck had produced. During that time, Chuck was attending the Illinois Art Institute, so it was convenient to set up an in-person meeting with Mikey to discuss the terms of the deal. The two ended up establishing such a great rapport that they headed to the recording booth — and they've been there ever since.

In just three years, the enterprising duo (they write, produce, record and release their own material through their C.A.K.E. label) has lived up to its ambitious name. They've shared the stage with De La Soul and the Clipse at the Pitchfork 2007 Festival, opened up for London-based Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. during the North American leg of her 2007 tour, had their "Mikey Rocks" single featured on HBO's hit show Entourage, and, this past summer, released their critically-acclaimed EP *The Bake Sale* (C.A.K.E./Chocolate Industries). Their refreshingly distinctive sound is informed by hip-hop's old-school, but infused with a modern sensibility. They opt for bass-heavy cuts with spare, boom-bap beats and bell sequences that recall vintage Rakim, Slick Rick, Rob Bass and EPMD songs, but they add some current sonic spice with a dash of Chicago house and some chopped-and-screwed bits. The lyrics, meanwhile, mark them as Lupe Fiasco and Pharrell Williams successors as they rhyme about hipster trappings: flossy sneakers, BMX bikes, gazelle shades, gold rope chains and True Religion jeans. And while they're bridging rap music's past and present and applauding the uncool-is-now-cool movement, the self-proclaimed "black Beastie Boys" are simply the by-products of the music they love to make. See, these kids are just having fun — and that's pretty cool. Cool Kids play the Blender Theater on the 21st of October.

Twenty years ago, down in Florida, 2 Live Crew made "Me So Horny" and "Throw the Di**" booty-shakin' club anthems — but not without incurring the furor of feminist and conservative political groups who criticized their provocative, near-pornographic and arguably misogynist lyrics.

Now, Tampa-based female rap duo Yo Majesty, composed of LaShunda "Shunda K." Flowers and Jewel "Jwl B." Baynham, is pushing both musical and societal boundaries. Like 2 Live Crew, these ladies have a penchant for unabashedly explicit, sexually charged, profanity-laced rhymes and for rambunctious, energetic beats that can set clubs ablaze. Even the duo's onstage antics are daring: Jwl B. is known to follow the lead of rappers like Ja Rule and 50 Cent and go shirtless during the group's sets. The willingness to rhyme with bravado about the female anatomy, to do what their male peers do without hesitation, demonstrates a desire to equal the playing field between the sexes. After Yo Majesty unleashed its 2006 debut EP, which featured electro-laced cuts like "Kryptonite Pu**y" and "Club Action," it caught the attention of Domino Records, who just released its 2008 debut album *Futuristically Speaking…Never Be Afraid*. Co-produced by Basement Jaxx, the album is a collection of brash, bass-driven, crunked-out but space-aged cuts like "Grindin' and Shakin,'" "Booty Klap," and "Fu**ed Up." Their lyrics make Lil Kim's catalog look like a lullaby collection, their beats possess the futuristic quality of Missy Elliott's or Outkast's work — all mixed with a Southern party-starting attitude that recalls Lil Jon and the Eastside Boys.

By encouraging folks to let go of their inhibitions, to express themselves clearly, they're doing more than making music: they're emerging as freedom writers. Their message: never be afraid to be yourself. Yo Majesty plays the Blender Theater on the 25th of October.

Yo Majesty

Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry

Fifty-four. That’s how many studio albums legendary Jamaican musician Lee “Scratch” Perry, 72, has recorded since he released his first cut, 1965’s “Chicken Scratch,” a song featuring a never-before-heard “scratching” turntable effect which spawned the neophyte nickname.

Along with King Tubby, the revered artist, songwriter, and producer is considered the originator of dub, a sound that started out as a mixing board experiment. Scratch is also recognized as a reggae pioneer, having released such seminal recordings as “Return of Django,” “Roast Fish and Cornbred,” and “Dreadlocks in Moonlight” and produced for the likes of Bob Marley & The Wailers, The Congos, Junior Murvin and Max Romeo.

Ever the risk taker, Scratch’s production antics have teetered along the line between genius and insanity. He’s been known to record breaking glass, gunshots, crying babies, traffic noises, and eerie screeches to create otherworldly sound effects, and the densely packed, echoing layers in his songs have become a personal trademark.

More than forty years after his musical initiation, Scratch remains a relentless innovator. His latest release, *Repentance* (Narnack Records), features Scratch’s hilarious, often times warbled metaphysical, prophetic ramblings and sexually explicit chants (as with the scandalous lead single “Pum Pum”) set against a chaotic sonic whirlwind (from distorted vocals to futuristic synthesizers) that fuses together electronica, hip-hop and reggae elements. Co-produced with Michigan heavy metal rocker Andrew W.K., *Repentance* features guest appearances by electronica star Moby, staccato noise duo Lightning Bolt!, Matisyahu bassist Josh Werner and even adult entertainer Sasha Grey. Unapologetically eccentric, *Repentance* serves as vindication for the flamboyant, widely misunderstood but undeniably brilliant Scratch, proof that his star is shining as bright as ever. Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry plays the Santos Party House on the 25th of October.

Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry

F uj i y a

&

M iya gi

British Electronica outfit Fujiya & Miyagi thrives on enigma and paradox. Despite the group's name, its members all hail from Brighton, not Japan - instead, the moniker points to a record player brand (Fuyija) and the mentor character (Mr. Kesuke Miyagi) in the '80s cult classic film, *The Karate Kid*. In their official bio, the group (which, by the way, is a quartet, not a duo) is playfully described as "not sounding like anything" but, instead, "sounding like everything." This type of elusiveness surrounds the group at every turn — and clearly, that's what they prefer.

Founded in 2000 by guitarist/vocalist David Best and beatmaker/synth guru/programmer Steve Lewis, Fujiya & Miyagi started off as a duo, releasing the minimalist *Electro Karaoke in the Negative Style* in 2002. Two years later, they brought bassist Matt Hainsby into the fray and in 2006 released the critically acclaimed *Transparent Things*. Named after a Nabokov novel that describes a state of heightened awareness where the past and present are inextricably tied, Transparent Things established Fujiya & Miyagi as intellectual, technology- and mathematically-inclined musicians hoping to create transcendental music by fusing together such varied influences as krautrock, Aphex Twin, Kraftwerk, Serge Gainsbourg, Brian Eno, LCD Soundsystem, Talking Heads and Human League.

Now, with the addition of drummer Lee Adams, they've brought us this year's conceptual, abstract and experimental *Lightbulbs* (*Deaf, Dumb & Blind*). Throughout the album, the multi-layered, swirling synthesizers, funky bass lines and throbbing beats go from cold and robotic to playful and frenetic. The lyrics, meanwhile, are both mysterious and seemingly nonsensical — on "Knickerbocker," for example, Best sings in a hushed tone about seeing the "ghost of Lena Zavaroni," a late Swedish singer who died of anorexia nervosa, while on "Dishwasher," he alludes to buying a kitchen appliance and segues into becoming carnivores, then implores the listener to look inside an encyclopedia. Confused yet? So are we. But it's the type of bewilderment that keeps our heads bopping, our bodies moving, and our stereos set to repeat. Fujiya Miyagi plays Mercury Lounge on the 22nd of October and Webster Hall on the 23rd.

Friendly Fires

The late cartoonist/illustrator Saul Steinberg once said, “The life of the creative man is led, directed and controlled by boredom; avoiding boredom is one of our most important purposes.” Ed Macfarlane, lead vocalist and bass/synth player for the British pop outfit Friendly Fires, would be inclined to agree. At the age of 14, he recruited his friend, drummer Jack Savidge, and decided to start a band. His motivation: pure ennui. “We lived in St. Albans, which is in London’s commuter belt, so there’s not a hell of a lot to do,” Macfarlane says. “I suppose we started a band because we had nothing better to do.” Once Savidge and Macfarlane met Ed Gibson, they added him to the fray, convincing him to become the band’s guitarist.

A decade later, as he reminisces about those early gigs, Macfarlane can’t help but laugh embarrassedly, peppering his speech with self-deprecatory comments. “We were listening to a lot of shitty, cheesy, pop-punk music like Green Day,” he says. “We were playing, like, Oasis and stuff like that.” Soon enough, they grew out of their punk phase and began favoring the sound of intellectual, post-rock bands like Faraquet. “I suppose we just got tired of playing really simple three-chord punk music,” Macfarlane reasons.

But another musical transition awaited as post-rock, too, lost its intrigue. In 2006, they began toying with the idea of writing and recording pop music. “We were bored of writing these really long and epic rock songs that just meandered a lot and didn’t really do anything,” Macfarlane says. “We hit this stage where we were like, ‘Let’s write a pop song; let’s just give it a go.’”

Writing their very first pop song, "Photobooth," proved to be a tedious, challenging ordeal, but one worth the trouble. Moreover, it wound up representing a pivotal moment for Friendly Fires. Satisfied with the quirky, danceable cut about cavorting inside a photo booth, the band set out to record an entire pop album. "'Photobooth' was the turning point from us being this arty band that had no pop music aspirations to us being a band that was writing pop music," Macfarlane says.

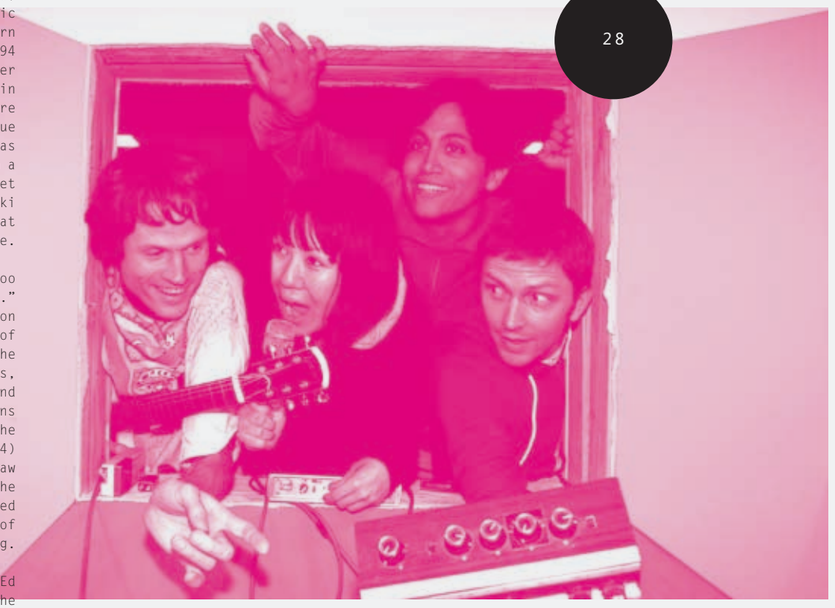
In 2007, the trio released the single "Paris," an incredibly infectious tune that interpolates a shimmering, shaker - and drum-driven beat with a dreamy chorus rife with immediacy that conveys an innocent, unrestrained yearning. Critics swooned over the song, heralding Friendly Fires as ones-to-watch in the UK. And, earlier this year, the band released its highly anticipated, eponymous debut on XL Recordings (home to Adele and Radiohead). From "In The Hospital," with its '70s funk-influenced opening arrangement and its disco-meets-rock edge, to "Jump In A Pool," a rambunctious, carnival-inspired sonic explosion, the 10-track album is exuberant and triumphant.

"I think our goal has been to create densely written tracks like "Paris" and "Jump In A Pool," which have lots of shakers, wood blocks and cowbells, but also incorporate these lush, euphoric melodies," Macfarlane explains.

Unlike many pop groups, Friendly Fires maintains its punk-influenced DYI approach to creating music. Rather than splurge on sessions at state-of-the-art studios, the trio recorded the entire album in Macfarlane's garage. "We recorded on a live microphone, a Sure SM58," he says. "We recorded all the hi-hats, toms and snares individually, which was a really time-consuming process." Granted, when they first recorded the album, they retreated to Macfarlane's garage mostly out of necessity — but they soon realized that it was the ideal space. In fact, when major labels began courting them, the group insisted on keeping that garage-y sound. Macfarlane confesses that, since signing to XL Records, they've only stepped inside a studio once — and it proved to be a disaster. "It was fuckin' awful because we had all this amazing equipment in front of us, and it was almost like an overload," he says. "There was too much to play with, so we weren't focusing on writing the songs which is what's really important. Working out of our garage forces us to write catchy songs precisely because we have such minimal equipment."

It's this insistence on thinking outside the box that has endeared Friendly Fires to audiences. Even their live performances are full of surprises. In August, before performing "Jump In A Pool" at London's Reading Festival, the band brought out six Brazilian drummers, as well as two Brazilian Carnival dancers, both of whom were decked out in sparkling bikinis and feathered headdresses. As the musicians burst into sumptuous cross-rhythms and the dancers shook their lovely hips, the crowd roared in approval, dancing in the aisles amidst showers of confetti. "It was amazing," Macfarlane says in a grateful tone. "It felt like, 'This is how our music should be!"

It seems like after weathering those tempestuous adolescent years and toying with all those angst-ridden musical genres, this trio finally found its calling: making catchy, danceable pop music with a light-hearted spirit and a joyful, boisterous sound.



Deerhoof

San Francisco's Deerhoof, the indie rock band known for its sweet-and-sour combination of raucous drum sequences, ferocious guitar riffs, and angelic vocal melodies, was initially born out of sheer panic. The year was 1994 and founding members Greg Saunier (drums) and Rob Fisk (bass) watched in dismay as their goth/metal group Nitre Pit disbanded. Resolving to continue gigging, the duo reinvented itself as Deerhoof, an abrasive DIY outfit with a wild improvisatory style. When they met Tokyo-born lead singer Satomi Matsuzaki a year later, they knew instantly that they had found the missing puzzle piece.

At first Deerhoof was branded "too noise for pop" and "too pop for noise." Eventually of course this combination was to prove basic to the sound of contemporary indie rock, lifting the band out of obscurity in the process, but after 14 years, 10 albums, and several lineup changes, Deerhoof remains a genre unto themselves. From the cartoon surrealism of **Milk Man** (2004) or *Friend Opportunity* (2007) to the raw minimalism of *Apple O'* (2003) and The Runners Four (2007), they have invented their own instantly recognizable way of writing, playing and recording a song.

Now, with the addition of guitarist Ed Rodriguez, Deerhoof has released the magical *Offend Maggie*. The album's cover art, designed by Japanese artist Tomoo Gokita, is a black-and-white pencil illustration of a faceless, shirtless man, standing in his trousers and donning headphones, with one leg propped atop a chair. And like its cover *Offend Maggie* is a study in contrast, ambiguity and tension.

Like all the best pop music, Deerhoof has always been strikingly new and yet strangely familiar. Melodic beauty, as if out of a half-remembered dream, is set against flashes of ragged power and brilliant innovation that seem to be as much of a surprise to the band as to the listener. Classic rock, J-pop, jazz, classical, and noise suddenly become inseparable, as if no stylistic barriers had ever truly existed. This is reflected in their equally wide following: Ask five fans to pin down Deerhoof's sound and you'll get five completely different answers. Ultimately their only rule has been to not have any. They are an inspiration because they've stayed DIY, stayed positive, and stayed pure. Deerhoof plays the Irving Plaza on the 22nd of October.

Delta Spirit

Not since the emergence of the dance troupe Stomp has any group managed to make trash can lids an appealing and mesmerizing form of instrumentation — that is, until the Southern California-based rock quintet Delta Spirit released the folksy, saloon-style, "Trashcan," off its 2008 debut, *Ode to Sunshine* (Rounder Records). But that's just one of many delightful surprises on the album, which fuses together alternative rock, country pop, and Northern soul through an eclectic mix of instruments (among them harmonica, piano, guitar, organ, orchestral bass drums, banjo and horns), energetic protest-like vocals, and uplifting, spiritually-grounded lyrics.

Delta Spirit's roots date back to 2004 when bassist Jon Jameson and drummer Brandon Young, who had played together in the emo group Noise Ratchet, recruited friend and guitarist Sean Walker to form a new band. The three musicians sought out a vocalist and discovered the perfect candidate in Matt Vasquez, an aspiring singer/songwriter whose philosophically inclined lyrics and movingly raw, uninhibited vocals transformed their boisterous compositions into compelling, soul-stirring tours de force. Shortly thereafter, they brought in multi-instrumentalist Kelly Winrich to complete the genre-defying group and, in 2005, they released their buzzed-about EP *I Think I've Found It*.

While opening sold-out shows for the Cold War Kids, Clap Your Hands Say Yeah and Matt Costa, the Delta Spirit wowed audiences with its energetic and joyful music. And then, of course, came the Internet buzz surrounding the singles "Trashcan" and "Streetwalker."

For most listeners, *Ode To Sunshine* is more than a source of entertainment — it's an experience. Delta Spirit's rousing arrangements and introspective lyrics, which encourage social consciousness and emphasize spirituality without descending into preacher-like tirades, have the power to motivate, enlighten and inspire listeners. So go ahead: let their spirit move you. Delta Spirit plays the Mercury Lounge on the 24th of October.

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